

I am truly honored to receive the Chris Schenk award. What a fantastic guide I have in Chris and how humbling it is to know that Deb and Russ and the FutureChurch family have such regard for Benincasa Community. I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you a bit about who we are.

The call to found Benincasa Community was so clear that it lasted 20 years and pulled me out of a legal services career. Throughout my late teens and 20s I was sure that I would live in a religious community as a canonically vowed sister.

After college I moved to Brooklyn and lived with wonderful Amityville Dominicans in their 60's and 70's. I soaked up their moving, funny, impressive stories of religious life. I was excited by their boldness and dedication to justice, but I was at the very beginning of my adventures and they were in or near to retirement; entering their order would be like joining a veteran's association as a teenager. It's just wasn't right.

A few years later, when I was working as an attorney, a friend from the Catholic Worker slipped me a VHS tape about the Abbey of Regina Laudis in CT. In it, fully habited Benedictines swing from trees with hand-saws and yoke their own oxen. Even though I was excited by a self-sufficient community of women, cloistered-life would not be life-giving for me, hard-wired as I am as a one on the enneagram. (Why spend my life pushing the buttons of the mother abbess?)

And even though the Catholic Worker was, and still is, my home away from home, my work as an attorney prohibited me from fully entering into the work and community-life of the CW.

It was like a prank call - God's call was loud and clear and repetitive, but whenever I said, "Hello?" there was only a click and then a diatone (I was the early 2000's - so of course God was metaphorically calling from a landline.)

It was during a visit to the Abbey Regina Laudis, however, that Mother Debra Joseph heard my vocation at a crossroads -- Catholic Worker, housing attorney, loud and often foul mouthed -- and stated that I would be a foundress. ... The next steps weren't mystical; they were practical: The Archdiocese of New York was (and still is) selling empty convents by the dozen for dozens of millions of dollars. And there was (and still is) a housing and homelessness crisis in NYC. And there were (and still are) many young people like myself drawn to committed community and willing to take "gospel-risks". Fill the empty convents with people searching for committed community and people in need of housing and accompaniment.

And what resources are needed to support such an endeavor? In our fifth year as Benincasa Community, these are the things we have learned are necessary:

- (1) Money for renovations and/or rent and/or maintenance;
- (2) A diversity of skills and experiences

... When the sink gets clogged, for example, who's your money on? The teacher, the lawyer, the counselor, the social worker, or the 3 academics?

- (3) People capable and willing to be "in leadership", i.e. to make the community their full-time work with very little or no compensation, and
- (4) Formation - theological training, models for how to lead rituals & foster spiritual practices, and a charism or lineage to step into.

For us, all four--financial support, in-kind assistance, willing leaders, and formation came from four places: The Catholic Worker, the Dominican Sisters of the North East, the Berrigans through Dan's "98th Street Jesuits" & Jonah House and our families.

... All of these communities offer hospitality, practice resistance, exercise their faith together, and know how to put a hot meal on the table (well ... maybe not the Jesuits). Sorry, Luke Hansen.

Although now Sean and I are married and Jimmy is the Godparent of our 3 month old baby, back in 2015 Sean was a Jesuit postulant, and Jimmy was completing his year of with Dominican Volunteers. We were barely friends (more like acquaintances who respected each other) facing a rather scary looking convent.

After restoring the building (with the help of those 4 communities), we turned our attention toward building community. Benincasa Community rests on 4 legs:

First, the **rhythm of a strong community life** We eat together and pray together 5 nights a week. We celebrate birthdays and holidays together. Stability is a priority for us. The faithful routine of cooking, cleaning and praying is like a circling jump rope - when the beat is steady, it allows others to jump in and out. It's a slow and steady way to build community.

A second aspect of our life is **hospitality**. We offer housing and friendship to people in need of either and we set aside space for artists, activists, and students visiting New York. We are well aware that the community is currently led by 3 white people and we do our best to support movements for and led by people of color offering housing, meals, sharing our networks and resources.

A third aspect of our life is **lay formation and working for church accountability**. We were surprised, overwhelmed in fact, with how quickly and how many young people came proverbially, knocking at our door. Young Catholics abandoned by our Church because of their sexuality, gender, race, commitment to feminism, dedication to ministry rather than donors, unwillingness to abide abusers, insistence that we take *laudato si* seriously and other such rational positions ... they were longing for a catholic community in which to grow. ... We responded in several ways.

In 2018 we launched TEA, Through Every Age, as for a cohort of 10 - 12 people each year. The program includes 4 retreats and online programming that introduces a people's history of the church (thanks to the likes of Rita Houlihan / Chris Schenk, for example) and theologians for our time who offer new frameworks for our lives. We began our second cohort in September 2019.

To address the need for inclusive, intentional, and a cooperatively-led Catholic liturgy, each month we host a gathering (a tradition inherited from Dan Berrigan's community) for 30 - 40 people. For those gathered we offer preaching workshops and opportunities to take on meaningful leadership roles.

And this summer we teamed up with Fordham to reinvent the tradition of an Italian a-vest or a giglio, this time with only women carrying Mary Magdalene through the streets.

As we do the work of cultivating a vibrant home and homebase for progressive Catholics, we also do the work of calling out the sins of the Archdiocese of New York. Does anyone here know Cardinal Dolan? ...

- In 2017, he went to inauguration of Donald Trump (when many faith leaders refused the invitation) and landed the Catholic Church in NYC on a short list of churches that will not offer sanctuary for immigrants.
- In 2018, Dolan ramped up efforts to lobby against the Child Victims Act, legislation that would extend the statute of limitations for survivor's who were abused as children. Dolan said that it would bankrupt the Church. We "brought our favorite pictures of mary" on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception to his house to pray for the passing of the legislation.

Finally, we are preparing for fourth aspect of our life to “bloom”: We are committed to creating a sustainable home, a “green monastery”. Over the last 4 years we have apprenticed at rural and urban farms, studied the New Cosmology, works of Thomas Berry, and sustainable organic and permaculture growing practices. We are looking for a new home in the NYC metro area and would appreciate any leads you may have!

Even though Benincasa is a small Catholic community with a local mission, we are able to amplify and integrate our work beyond the New York area because of Future Church.

- **They operate above the treeline.**
- They bring us news from Rome. Not just *news*, but a critical perspective so that we, on the ground, can discern our next steps and disseminate accurate information to our community.
- They bring us the good news uncovered by theologians and researchers, Chris’ work finding women in the catacombs, Rita’s work re-introducing Mary Magdalene, Kate Kuensler’s work slinging cannon law to save parishes. (Let me tell you, Kate, Jamie Manson and I once had a meeting at an Olive Garden in Providence RI and it was like meeting the oracle at Delphi).
- They bring us the voices of women we would never have the privilege of interacting with through Catholic Women Preach.
- They promote Benincasa’s actions and connect us to people around the country doing similar work.
- It is no overstatement to say that Future Church is the tie that binds those of us longing for a Church that welcomes the full participation and leadership of all Catholics.
- Even if we don’t agree on how to achieve that full participation and what that leadership looks like (for example, in regard to male married priests, I don’t let my husband tell me what to do, I sure as hell am not going to let someone else’s!), Future Church can hold these differing opinions and say “yes, and ...” yes and deacons, yes and married priests, yes and a new way of thinking about leadership altogether...
- Thank you, Future Church, for holding us together in dialogue, together in prayer, together and in the struggle to move forward.
- Congrats on 25 years! We are so grateful!